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HOW THE CZAR'S DEATH AFFECTS EUROPE.

BY SERGIUS STEPNIAK.

THE decree of fate is sealed. The Czar is dead. A new leaf is turned in the history of Russia and a living enigma stands before the world in the person of his successor, a young man, almost a boy, who suddenly appears upon the historical scene as the autocratic ruler of a nation of a hundred and ten millions of souls and the absolute master of an army of four million combatants. The fatal illness of the Czar, which had been undermining his herculean constitution for several years, was kept so secret by his immediate surrounding, who must have known it, that the world outside had not a shadow of suspicion.

None of the crowned heads or prominent statesmen of our time gave such pledge of long life as Alexander III., and the question of succession seemed so distant that the personality of his heir did not excite the people's curiosity to any extent.

All the heirs to great crowns are as a rule more or less blanks. So it was with the late Czar, and with Alexander II. when he was heir-apparent, and with the present German Emperor. But about the new Czar even the scantiest hints are wanting.

The Russian army and officials and the millions of people in towns and villages have been summoned by the toll of the church bells to their places of worship, there to take the solemn oath of allegiance to the new Czar, promising to blindly, implicitly and unreasoningly obey every order of his, regardless of their own feelings, natural affections or interests. And yet not a single one of them has any idea of the man, or rather the boy, into whose hands they put their destinies, and they will not ask from him any pledge or promise in return.

Nobody can tell what the new powerful actor in the world's history has in store for us. But we cannot keep our minds in a

state of blank expectancy. We must fix upon something, be it conclusion or conjecture, hope or surmise. And in order to get some foundation for either, we must proceed to discover those elements of the problem which are known, in order to limit and circumscribe those which are unknown.

When the news of the mortal illness of the Czar came upon the unprepared world like a thunderbolt from a serene sky, the whole European press rang with expressions of sympathy and regret, such as have rarely been heard at the death-bed of the great benefactors of humanity. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. But there are dead men about whom it is impossible to keep silent. Now, since one must speak, one must tell the truth, and the truth about Alexander III. is that as a ruler he was not a benefactor of his country.

With his many private virtues and unmistakably good intentions he never showed any of the qualities of a statesman, which made some of his predecessors great and glorious, though their lives and conduct were certainly most objectionable. During the thirteen years of his reign he used his enormous power for the sole object of obstructing in every possible way the natural progress of the nation. This is what impartial history will tell about him and this is what every unprejudiced man of our time will admit.

Alexander III. became popular in Europe since he was declared to be the peacemaker of the nations. And now people ask themselves with anxiety whether his successor will follow in the same line, or, perhaps, will rush headlong into some foreign war, in order to distract people's attention from domestic affairs.

Apprehensions of that kind, we can say it quite confidently, are perfectly groundless.

It is an unmitigated pleasure to render justice to an enemy whom one has no longer to fight. In his foreign policy the late Czar was as fortunate and reasonable as he was ill advised, unlucky, and blamable in his domestic *régime*. True, in his relations to Bulgaria, where it was necessary for him to depart from the autocratic routine and strike a new line of action, he committed no end of blunders, wantonly alienating the sympathies of a young and promising nation whose enthusiastic loyalty he could have kept so easily. But even in Bulgarian affairs he did not allow his personal feelings to lead him into open hostilities. Domesticated and retiring as he was, he had no desire to bring himself

into public notice, to shine, to be talked about, to play a prominent part on the world's scene, like his grandfather Nicholas, and Alexander I., whose romantic ambition cost Russia rivers of blood. His ideal was the stubborn preservation of the *status quo*. This made his reign one of the darkest in the annals of our country, but it was just what was needed from him in foreign politics. He naturally became a staunch partisan of peace, war offering no temptations to him. We must be grateful to a Czar even for so little. But we must not forget that in following the dictates of common humanity he was at the same time acting in conformity with his personal and dynastical interests, which would have been endangered by any serious war.

There is one fundamental fact which must be taken into account by those who wish to form a clear idea of the Russian situation. It is that within the last thirty years Russia has made an enormous stride in advance, notwithstanding the stagnant immobility of her political institutions. She has become quite a new country. The economic conditions which modern sociology declares to be the keynote of national life have changed since the emancipation of the serfs, assuming gradually the European type. But more striking still has been her intellectual growth. The bulk of the Russian educated class is entirely European in their culture; and for them autocracy is now as much an obsolete, absurd institution as for the intelligent foreign observers who look upon Russian things from outside. Hence the deep rooted antagonism between the government and all the educated classes in the country, antagonism which found its most glaring manifestation in the so-called nihilism, but is much broader than may be judged by this extreme manifestation of discontent. For one man who joins the revolution there are thousands of men who are secretly in sympathy with the efforts to have done with the present *régime*, and to obtain for their country freedom and representative government, which would make the Russians masters of their own destinies. And behind them there are hundreds of thousands and millions of people, who, not having logic enough to fully adhere to a constitutional programme in the European sense, are dissatisfied with the present *régime*, and want changes in the constitutional line.

We are just in receipt of a very interesting document from Russia—a project of a constitution, which had been circulating

in St. Petersburg for some time before anything was known of the Czar's serious condition. It is from the pen of a man standing high in the legal profession, and it testifies to careful study and thought. But it is not the project itself that interests us, so much as the introductory remarks which the author prefixes to it. He says :

"Two questions are now before the Russian people: (1) Is a constitution *necessary* for Russia? (2) Is a constitution *possible* in Russia? The first of these questions is a question only in form; in fact, it has been already solved in the mind of the Czar, whose daily experience reminds him of the necessity of a constitutional government for the regular course of state administration. It is solved in the minds of an overwhelming majority of statesmen in power, and only the inveterate custom of bureaucratic insincerity seals their lips. It is solved in the minds of Russian society and all its representatives, the press, the *zemstvo*, and town deputies with only insignificant exceptions. It is solved even in the minds of the uneducated classes of the masses, because the discontent with the existing arbitrary rule, which pays no attention to law, is universal, and the thirst for freedom and justice is growing. And finally it is no longer a question for the revolutionists, who, in times past, denied the importance of constitutional government to the welfare of the people.

"True, different classes of our society represent that constitution to themselves differently, but this touches already on the second question—that of the possibility of a constitution for Russia, because at a particular time in a country only one constitution is possible, namely, that which answers to its social and political peculiarities. Very, very soon a constitution for Russia will be universally discussed, because every one is already thinking of it. The time will come when the stones will cry out: Prince Meschersky* will propose a constitution of his own make, Witte and Yermoloff† of theirs, Pobydonostseff of his."

Autocracy has outlived its age, and its overthrow is a question of days, the banner of democratic freedom rallying nowadays all that is progressive and truly patriotic in Russia. The great difficulties and dangers of the struggle, the enormity of the distances and scarcity of population, which stand as almost insuperable obstacles to a concerted action, while the government, having at its command railroads, telegraphy, and all the resources of modern industry, has the advantage of tremendous concentration of its forces; the barbarous punishments, inflicted upon all who dare to raise their voices against the present form of government—all this may, and does, keep down in a latent state the smouldering discontent, forcing upon the people

* The editor of the reactionary paper *Grazhdanin*, which advocates privileges for the nobility.

† Ministers of Finance and Agriculture, respectively, who are supposed to represent Liberalism in the present ministry, but who are strong supporters of protection.

the habits of hypocritical reticence, which is the greater scourge of tyranny. Still that discontent is there, constituting an enormous hidden force, which is more dangerous to the autocracy than all the bombs and all the palace or street insurrections.

It is a mistake to suppose that autocracy is maintained by brute force alone. Brute force is of no avail without the intellectual force to direct it or utilize it in one way or another. The autocracy is maintained by the universal hypocrisy and lies of the educated classes, their timidity and mutual diffidence. If all those who wish for a change of the system of government, would all of a sudden get the courage to frankly say so, autocracy could not stand one month.

Now a war is just that powerful engine which operates such a transformation. No people can preserve a timid reticence in time of war, when the destinies of the country and the lives of those most dear to them are at stake. No police can then be strong enough to make the people silent. They will speak out their mind, and in so doing they will bring to light the existence of that common bond of ideas and aspiration which emboldens them and urges to more energetic demonstration leading to decisive steps.

Those who were in St. Petersburg at the time of the last Turkish war, when the news of the reiterated disasters under Plevna came like thunderstrokes upon the public, remember that the city seemed on the eve of a revolution. In the streets, at the public places and gatherings, people were abusing the government in a way unheard of in Russia, and the police were nowhere, pretending not to hear and daring not to further provoke the people by interference.

In the present conditions of the country, moral, economical, financial, a war would be infinitely more dangerous. With her huge population and universal conscription, which has been in force since 1871, Russia might be able to put into the field as many soldiers as Germany, Austria, and Italy put together. But the finances of the state would not admit of anything like an armament on such a gigantic scale. The Russian Czars were wise enough to be satisfied with keeping the armament at the same high level as the strongest of their western neighbors—Germany. We may fairly hope that on her own soil, for defensive purposes, Russia would be able to put into the field—somewhat slowly, we fear—a force equal to that of the Teutonic Empire. But

the finances of the state will not allow her to muster one-fourth of that force for a war of invasion, which is much more expensive and which alone can trouble the imagination of foreign politicians. The last Turkish war can serve as a good test of the real force of the Russian Empire. Whilst in the war of 1870-71 Germany hurled upon France over two-thirds of its nominal forces, Russia in 1877 could send against the Turks only about 300,000 combatants; and the effort exhausted her finances so completely that she was compelled to stop midway without accomplishing her historical task. Since that time things have not improved, but have gone from bad to worse; Russian finances and credit being equally shattered. On the eve of the Turkish war, when her credit was naturally at a low ebb, the Government of Russia was able to obtain a loan of eighty-seven and one-third million roubles at the premium of eight and three-tenths per cent. Since 1890, notwithstanding the glamour of Vyshnegradsky's schemes and the enthusiasm of her French allies, the Russian Government had to pay a premium of about 20 per cent. (19½)—a fine upon its poverty which is exceeded only by that imposed by the financiers upon the insolvent Turkey. And even at that price Alexander III. could not get the money he wanted. The loan of last autumn has not been covered yet and is not likely to be, although the French subscribed to it eight times over. The great famine of 1891, the result of many years of misgovernment, was a blow to the Russian finances as well as to the prosperity of the people.

Is it possible that in such circumstances the new Czar can think of embarking upon a war? No certainly, unless he loses his mind. And, even if he does, there is the whole of his family, his ministers, and court to prevent his committing such madness. It is a question of life and death for all of them; because any arduous, not to say unsuccessful, war, unless it be a defensive one, will mean the collapse of the system by which they live and thrive. Russia must stick to peaceful policy, whatever the personal inclination of the Czar. Besides, there is not the slightest reason to suppose him to be otherwise than peacefully inclined.

The danger of a European war does not lie with Russia, but with Germany, whose Emperor, both by his personal inclination and through considerations of interior policy, may give the signal for a frightful butchery. Will the check which is laid upon him by

Russia's alliance with France be removed or not? That is the question of the moment, which could hardly be answered definitely, even by the most intimate friend of the former Czarevitch. It depends to a great extent upon the personal inclinations of the new autocrat. And autocrats are changeful in their moods, being subject to so many underhand influences, namable and unnamable, court intrigues and whims. We can only make conjectures.

The French party is decidedly predominant at the St. Petersburg Court, the German party being hardly represented at all since the Grand Duke Vladimir has been converted to the French side. Some few years ago he was the main prop of the German party, his wife having been on one memorable occasion ordered to leave the capital for being too confidential in her communications to Prince Bismarck.

The Czarina is also entirely on the French side, and so is the Minister of Finance, Mr. Witte, who is said to be the coming man, and Professor Bunge, the unswerving partisan of peace, whom Alexander III. recommended to his successor as his special adviser. For some time to come the young Czar will surely be led by his advices, dazzled as he must be by the sudden accession to power. But how long this influence will last, and what will be those that shall succeed it, nobody can tell. It is all a game of chance.

Is it not clear, one is naturally led to ask, that it is unsafe to build upon the personalities of rulers? Would it not be much wiser for all the friends of peace and progress to put more of their trust upon the great democratic and liberal Russia, which alone can fulfil their expectations and which, let us hope, will fulfil them in the not very distant future.

S. STEPNIAK.